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AUTHOR	Freeman, James A.
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ABSTRACT

However the initial germ of a written work arises, there usually follows a prewriting period of meditation. At this rehearsal stage in writing, the author must gain a sense of audience and grope with such variables as genre, point of view, voice, line, tone, and pattern. Many authors of fiction keep journals or notebooks as incubation places where ideas for a work may arise. Lists can also act as a presyntactic ordering of things caught up in the net of a writer's concern. Some authors may use clustering or the unsubordinated mapping of ideas. While all writers engage in some type of prewriting rehearsal, there seem to be great differences in method. Reflective writers use extensive mental or physical prewriting before producing a polished first draft. Many short story writers are reflective and either prewrite extensively before getting to a first draft that is very close to a finished product or else they are forced by the strict limits of their genre to rewrite again and again. The reactive writers such as novelists use some sort of mental preparation but do very little actual prewriting. Nearly all of them plunge ahead without outlining or list-making, making most of their discoveries by actually writing. The fact that short story writers are usually reflective and novelists reactive contradicts the thesis that the two modes are developmental. Whether they are or not, it is clear that they characterize tangibly different ways of going about writing. One does not produce better writing than the other. Reflective writing tends to get at a product sooner in the writing process, but reactive writing can bring out things that might never have surfaced without freewriting. (HOD)

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How Prewriting Fits Into The Writing Process

by
James A. Freeman

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How Prewriting Fits Into The Writing Process

Until the question of method
is solved, talk about the task
is useless. ---Mao

Everything put together sooner
or later falls apart. ---Paul Simon

In her article "Hand, Eye, Brain: Some Basics in the Writing Process," Janet Emig states that vision and memory are necessary prerequisites to writing. During a strange period in my life, when I was finishing an undergraduate thesis in philosophy, trying to be human, and working on a long story all at the same time, I became aware of my own use of memory and visualization in the incubation process. Because this story was written in fits and starts over a long period of time, it is easier to see the proces of its development. In writing the story, perhaps my best work ever, memory and vision played a crucial role.

The whole project began with notes that I scribbled in the margins during classes. These notes were concerned mostly with events in my memory that ran counter to the systems and orderings that I was studying. I would sit in class, appearing interested, and attempt to visualize those disconnected memories that might somehow display to others the chaotic flux of the way things really happen. These visions would sometimes appear vividly, called up from memory by a particular emotional state. It was hologram city: seeing the past. I began to make lists of these revisualized memories as they came to mind, making no attempt to group them according to any categories. After I had listed

several of these memories, I began writing descriptive scenes and half-scenes that captured as much of the visual effect of the memory as possible. I deleted most of the scenes, keeping only those that were extremely vivid or that denied interpretation.

Years before I had gotten lost in a lava tube near Mt. Lassen with a broken flashlight and had been unable to control my imagination. Hallucinations without drugs. There was endless blackness filled only with memory. I decided to use a fictionalized account of this event as the central plot thread of the story. The word hieroglyphics seemed perfect as a name for the pieces I was arranging and this became the title of the work. I decided that I was going to try to show some of the friction that occurs when people try to impose order on what they experience. My hieroglyphics might represent the random occurance of events by chance.

When I had developed a bare bones chronology of plot events that were to take place in the lava tube, I began looking for the central character. I made lists of possible names, occupations, characteristics and locations that he might have. Weeks passed before I hit on a name and an occupation that seemed to fit. In the interim time I began to divide the written visualizations into those that were 'positive' and those that were 'negative.' Those memories concerning death or uncontrollable events were generally 'negative;' those concerning partially controllable or need fulfilling experiences were 'positive.'

I began hanging the 'positive' and 'negative' memories onto the bare bones narration on the basis of where they fit in the plot development. Where the character is floundering at ordering

his experiences and is unable to control his imagination I placed 'negative' memories. Where he is learning to accept 'negative' plot events and memories as inevitable I put 'positive' memories. I then decided that the character's attempts to remain rational and calm should work at first but make things worse eventually: crab grass on the lawn of life. I had done nearly all the prewriting I could.

Before I began the first draft, I made several trips into the longest lava tubes in glacier-covered Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Adams. I would walk in a mile or so, shut off my light, and try to record sounds, tactile sensations and emotional reactions. I found I could only take about 20 minutes of sensory deprivation: life with no prospect; only retrospect.

After these experiments I began writing at the typewriter, paragraph by paragraph, usually doing one to four pages at a sitting. At the end of each sitting I would read and reread aloud what I had written. Often I would close my eyes and try to picture the images and scenes I had just read. I found that many of the memories just didn't work and I scrapped them. Also, I recalled several more new memories that could be fictionalized to work well with the emerging story.

Once, when I was completely stuck on a section, I returned to Mt. St. Helens to reexperience what the caves felt like. Usually when I hit an impasse I would just read unrelated books to get me going again. Seeing language in action was often enough. After hitting a real block when working with an imaginary space scene, I arranged to spend an evening in an observatory watching

the rings of Saturn and the moon's battle scars. The night was cold, stark, clear and star-studded...filled with points of light like the projections of a pin pricked chandelier. This got my imagination going and helped greatly.

Months went by and I made more and more changes until my character was not much like what I had planned at all. The story (along with wine bottles) piled up until after some forty pages it ended itself. I now had a product and a lot of unanswered questions. I wanted to know more about how authors make the transition from ideas to fiction through prewriting. I also wanted to find out if these prewriting skills could be taught. In particular, I wanted to examine the role that visualizing plays in prewriting and to find out what professional writers actually do to get to the product stage.

GOING

After reading the Paris Review series titled Writers at Work, as well as Allen's book The Writer on His Art and Van Gelder's work Writers and Writing, I have found some prewriting patterns. A few of these approaches pertain to prewriting for any type of work while many of them have to do with writing fiction. Although some of the common prewriting techniques deal only with the short story or the novel, I think that the would-be writer can draw several useful generalizations about all prewriting from them.

In Writers at Work, Malcolm Cowley makes distinctions between four stages in the composition of a story. At first comes

the germ of a story, then a period of conscious meditation, then a first draft, and finally revision, which may be simply detail work or an extensive reworking of several drafts. It is in the first three stages--germination through beginning draft--that we can see several prewriting activities.

The germ of a story is often something that the writer sees, hears, remembers or is told about. Whether imagined or factual, a story's germ is an element that expresses a situation or mood in one sharp detail. Some small event comes along that serves as a focal point for a whole mass of previously disorganized material in the writer's mind. This may be a fragment of overheard dialogue, a newspaper article, a stranger's expression, an image that the writer imagines, a point of view that he wants expressed, a character trait, or almost anything.

A visual image is often the signal that sets an author to work. For many writers an image is not only the germ of a story but also the story to be told. Gabriel Marquez has stated that his novels began with: "a completely visual image... the starting point of Leaf Storm is an old man taking his grandson to a funeral ... in One Hundred Years it is an old man taking his grandson to the fair to find out what ice is." (Murray, "Write Before Writing," CCC, Sept. 78, p. 379) It is almost as if Marquez's images are puzzles that, when solved, reveal his story.

William Faulkner began The Sound and the Fury with "a mental picture." In his Paris Review interview he says:

> "The picture was of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers in a pear tree, where she could see through a window where her grandmother's funeral was taking place and report to her brothers

> on the ground below. By the time I explained who they were and what they were doing and how her pants got dirty, I realized it would be impossible to get all of this into a short story and it would have to be a book." (Writers at Work, First Series, p. 130)

However the initial germ of a work arises, there usually follows a prewriting period of meditation or what Donald Graves calls "rehearsal." The writer has to consider several factors at the rehearsal stage. He must gain a sense of his audience, those people who will be coming to his particular "stage show." He may grope with such variables as genre, point of view, voice, line, tone, and pattern, attempting all the time to communicate using the best possible means for his purpose.

Many authors of fiction keep journals or notebooks as incubation places where ideas for a work may arise. Hawthorne, Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Virginia Woolf have left us the "germs" of their genius in notebooks. These recorded rehearsals are a way of arranging and rearranging the gleanings of a perceptive life while looking for a lucky combination of items that may set off a totally new way of understanding experience.

Lists are also helpful here. They can act as a presyntactical ordering of things caught up in the net of a writer's concern. For me, list enteries usually come from the unplanned lower levels of consciousness. I seem to plan much more honestly when I arrange items according to the way they feel like they go together. Most of my stories come from lists of potential scenes and ideas that seem to fit together or to conflict: we see only what we are trained to see unless we invent capricious ways to get out from behind our blinders. List-making helps me see new

combinations of ideas. I think most writers put together some cluster of elements (really a mental list) before actually writing. Making these elements external by listing them helps me find order in the chaotic flux of the subject of emerging story.

For some authors, list-making is the primary source of inspiration or conflict in a piece. R. V. Cassil reports that his fine story "In Central Blue" came from three short lists he experimented with. He, like Nabokov, wrote in tonal list-categories that provided most of the conflict for his work. Here is the birthplace of "In Central Blue:"

List I

Wings (a movie first released about 1930)
spring thaws
gravel road
model airplanes
grain elevator
Steven's Crackshot (a cheap, singleshot .22 rifle)
titless cousin
Essex (an automobile no longer manufactured)
moon-glinting railroad tracks
mother's perfume
War Aces (a magazine)
spatsies (a slang term for sparrows)

List II

Luger
fuselage
Zeppelin
London
spring offensive
Lt. Frank Luke
negligee
Spad
Krauts
flight leader
Sam Browne belt

List III

tickles
kisses
silks
cleavage
"doing intercourse"
ravish
buttons
quick feel
Silver Screen (magazine)
hot breath

In a sense, the rehearsing writer is much like a welder: if his fire is hot enough he can bond together even stubborn pieces into a coherent whole. Any piece that cannot be put into some new arrangement is best left lying on the shelf, waiting for a mate. The poet/welder Walt Whitman wrote poems that are essentially beautiful catalogue lists. His successes show

us that personal list-making is a valuable prewriting tool. In this type of listing the emphasis is on a generative emotional hierarchy rather than the artificial subordinations of an outline.

There are several other helpful prewriting techniques. Gabriel Rico has used clustering effectively, and many instructors have found that unsubordinated mapping of ideas can help students over the empty page blues. Also, S. I. Hayakawa's fifteen minute pell-mell journal entries can be an uninhibiting proving ground.

While all writers engage in some type of prewriting rehearsal, there seem to be great differences in method. Susan Sowars found a division in the writing processes of a group of graduate students she was studying. Some of the subjects made their discoveries during prewriting, others during writing and revision. These discoveries included everything from personal insights to assignment-related organizational and content insights. Sowars' findings have a great bearing on prewriting methods. She says:

> "The earlier the stage at which insights occur, the greater the drudgery associated with the writing-rewriting tasks. It may be that we resemble the young reflective and reactive writers. The less developmentally mature reactive writers enjoy writing more than reflective writers. They may use writing as a rehearsal for thinking just as young, reactive writers draw to rehearse writing. The younger and older reflective writers do not need to rehearse by drawing to write or by writing to think clearly or to discover new relationships and significant content." (Murray, p. 377, underline mine)

I have found that the division between reflective and reactive writers holds up among the writers interviewed by the Paris Review. The reflective writers use extensive mental and/or physical prewriting before painfully producing a polished first draft that acts as the final product. Much of their time is

spent preparing for the act of writing. The reactive writers use some sort of mental preparation but do very little actual prewriting. They make their discoveries by writing and revising, where the early drafts are, in effect, rehearsals.

GOING

Angus Wilson, a reflective writer, speaks of a "gestatory period" where he must persuade himself of the truth of what he wants to say. Dorothy Parker says that it takes her six months to do a story: "I think it out and then write it sentence by sentence--no first draft." William Styron reports that: "I seem to have some neurotic need to perfect each paragraph--each sentence even--as I go along." Each of these writers has a careful conception of their work before they attempt to translate it. For them, the act of writing is a way of getting their ideas correctly transcribed.

In contrast, reactive writers like Frank O'Conner must race through a first draft a full speed. O'Conner says: "Get black on white... I don't give a hoot what the writing's like, I write any sort of rubbish which will cover the main outlines of the story, then I can begin to see it." Likewise, James Thurber gets his stories written quickly and then rewrites "endlessly," much like O'Conner. It may be that reactive writers who make their discoveries by writing would lose their important ideas if they waited for a clear arrangement of them to appear. Getting "black on white" is a way of ensuring that there will be material to shape into a product by revision.

Novelist Georges Simenon is one of the best examples of a truly reactive writer. In his Paris Review interview he states that he has only a vague notion of character as he begins writing: "I know nothing whatever about the events which will occur later. Otherwise they would not be interesting to me." (Writers, First Series, p. 152, underline there) Simenon writes very quickly, a chapter a day, for as long as he can stand the strain. He says: "I am one of my characters. I feel what he feels... day after day, chapter after chapter, I find what comes later... it's almost unbearable after five or six days."

While Simenon writes under the overpowering influence of a character, reflective writers like Truman Capote do not. Capote must discover the end of his story before he writes the first word. He says:

> "I invariably have the illusion that the whole play of a story, its start and finish, occur in my mind simultaneously--that I'm seeing it in one flash... I seem to remember reading that Dickens, as he wrote, choked with laughter over his own humor and dripped tears all over the page when one of his characters died. My own theory is that the writer should have considered his wit and dried his tears long, long before setting out to evoke similar reactions in a reader." (Writers, First Series, p. 12, underline mine)

It is no accident that Capote, who thinks primarily in terms of the short story, is a reflective writer. Most authors in this demanding genre are reflective writers who prewrite extensively. The few reactive short story writers, like O'Conner and Thurber, tend to rewrite much more than their contemporaries. If we define prewriting as all writing that is done up to the point of the first draft, then it appears that authors of short fiction prewrite more. In other words, short story writers

either prewrite extensively before getting to a first draft that is very close to a finished product, or else they are forced by the strict limits of their genre to rewrite again and again.

While there are exceptions, most novelists are primarily reactive writers. Freed from the limits of economy inherent in the short story, the novelist embarks on a different kind of journey with its own difficulties. I couldn't find any novelists interviewed by The Paris Review who made scene-by-scene outlines of their work. Some novelists, like Faulkner, Forster, Nabokov and Marquez, have several scenes in mind before they begin to write, but even these writers make most of their discoveries by actually writing. It is common that a novelist starts out with a few characters that he knows something about and then simply "lets go."

Novelists differ greatly in their techniques: some write and rewrite every few pages before going on; some do a first draft of each chapter before revising and some draft a whole book before making changes, but nearly all of them must plunge ahead without outlining or listmaking if the job is going to get done. Even Hemingway, who usually produced only a few pages a day, was forced to speed up when working in novel form. The almost endless project of writing a novel may require mostly reactive writing.

The fact that short story writers are usually reflective writers and novelists reactive writers contradicts the thesis that the two modes are developmental. Although Susan Sowars feels that reactive writers are less developmentally mature than reflective writers, this may not be the case. Unless the art of writing a

short story is a higher form than novel writing, as Poe thought it was, then the developmental thesis is damaged. I certainly wouldn't want to be committed to saying that the high incidence of reactive writers who write novels means that novelists as a group are less developmentally mature.

Surely, the two modes can work together in one writer. A ' sically reflective writer who prewrites extensively may enter the reactive mode when he looks at what he has written with rewriting in mind. He has not used the writing of his first draft as a rehearsal for thinking, preferring to prewrite rather than freewrite, but in looking at his draft he now makes discoveries and sees changes that he wants to make. Whether we say that this reflective writer has now entered the reactive mode depends only on our definition of the prewriting period. If prewriting is all writing done before a work is finished, then the distinction between the two modes is hazy because all rewriting is a reactive process. If prewriting is all the writing done up to the point of a first draft, then the reflective/reactive distinction is sharper with reflective writers producing a more polished (read developmentally mature?) first effort.

GONE

I read thirteen English A papers on prewriting techniques, trying to determine how many students used each of the writing modes. Of the thirteen students, seven are primarily reactive writers who use little or no prewriting and four appear to be reflective writers using extensive prewriting. I was unable to determine which group two of the students fit in. One student,

representative of the reflective writers, said: "I begin writing a paper in my head long before it ever reaches the paper." Another student, one of the reactive writers, wrote: "I find that writing itself is the best way to develop my ideas as opposed to any other form." Only two students mentioned using formal outlines, while several wrote about using lists as a helpful tool. Two writers even included the lists that they used in writing this particular assignment. In all, the group wrote about prewriting techniques that varied from taking a shower all the way to making a formal sentence outline.

The big questions remain: is movement from the reactive writing mode to the reflective developmental? Are the two categories useful? Does one mode produce better writing than the other? Are the two modes related to brain hemisphericity? Should we teach to one method at the expense of the other or engage and reward only one brain hemisphere? I can only guess at the answers.

It has been my experience that the movement from reactive writing to reflective is developmental. In junior high and high school I discovered that I could write very rapidly, making wild leaps from paragraph to paragraph, often ending up with conclusions that were very different than what I started with. My papers from this period were considered very good and they were all focused on a specific subject, but they were written under a kind of personal inspiration with little or no unifying thesis. In short, they were fun to write and required only a vaguely personal cause and effect relationship to tie the pieces together.

During the first two years of college a change began to take place. The papers got much more formal with more documentation

and direct text analysis required. I became a journalism major: out went the adjectives and adverbs: in came the search for a unifying lead. I edited the school paper for a time, then switched my major to literature and got a couple of associate arts degrees. My writing was becoming more reflective. I was slowing down, planning more, and enjoying writing a little less.

I transferred to Reed, changed my major to philosophy, and began writing formal research papers. My best efforts from before would barely pass me there. I developed a very strong critical sense and my writing slowed down even more, although the required papers were getting longer and more frequent. Even after doing extensive prewriting I was having to rewrite each line of my first draft before going on to the next. I was becoming a self-conscious bleeder and it was taking hours to write a page sometimes. My products got better and better, but it took me longer than ever before to get to that point. By the time I finished my thesis, I was avoiding writing like it was a curse. There was still a big kick of accomplishment at having done well, but the actual time spent writing was usually agonizing. Writing fiction was the only kind of writing that I honestly enjoyed then.

My move from reactive writing to the other extreme (where I had to know what I was going to say before I said it) is only one example of a developmental shift. It is difficult to say what value should be placed on this kind of development, and it is equally difficult to determine if it is a natural development at all. Clearly, the high incidence of reflective short story writers and reactive novelists contradicts the developmental thesis. We need to know more about this question.

Whether the two modes are developmental or not, it is clear that they characterize tangibly different ways of going about writing. It is true that there are grey areas, such as when a writer like Dostoevsky uses highly reactive notebooks as a reflective prewriting technique, but in general the categories are useful. They are not simply functions of audience or subject area or genre either. It may be impossible to reactively write a research paper, but reactive writing early on in such a project might give important direction to the research being done. Further, reactive writing, in conjunction with rewriting, can be as effective in producing a product as reflective writing. With reactive writing, discoveries and realizations just come a little later in the writing process. It is more important to make these insights by whatever means than to stick to a program. Many reflective writers could probably use a dose of reactive writing to get them over the dry spots and to keep them thinking. Reactive writing certainly speaks more toward writing as a way of knowing. Both modes can be used successfully under all kinds of conditions and it is a mistake to teach only reflective prewriting techniques at the expense of freewriting.

It is clear, then, that one mode does not produce better writing than the other. Reflective writing tends to get at a product sooner in the writing process (e.g. the first or second draft) but reactive writing can bring out things that might never have surfaced without freewriting. Reactive writing in conjunction with rewriting may be as good or better than reflective prewriting in terms of product. Surely, reactive writing is a

valuable tool for getting words on paper and for quieting the inhibiting editor in us. Some of the many hours I spend getting ready to write and then trickling words might be better spent using writing as a means of discovery. In doing this paper I have come across several realizations about the value of reactive writing as a pre-product tool. I think it best to end with a description of what I think happened in this paper. Peter Elbow says it best:

> You believe X. You write out your belief or perception or argument that X is the case. By the time you have finished you see something you didn't see before: X is incorrect or you see you no longer believe X. Now you keep writing about your perplexity and uncertainty. Then you begin to see Y. You start to write about Y. You finally see that Y is correct or you believe Y... then finally you write out Y as fully as you can and you are satisfied with it. (Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers, p. 22)

The process described above, the same process I feel happened here, is called learning.